



Robert F. Taft, S.J., at the celebration of his 60th anniversary as a member of the Society of Jesus, Refectory of the Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome, November 6, 2009.

Robert F. Taft, S.J.

(1932–2018)

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Robert F. Taft, S.J., had been saying farewell to Byzantium for more than a decade,¹ but he finally departed from this life before dawn on November 2, 2018, at about the same time that he would rise every morning to celebrate the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom during his fifty-five years as a Jesuit priest. He was devoted to God, faithful to the Church, and dedicated to scholarship; the borders between the *θυσιαστήριον* and the *φροντιστήριον* were fluid, just as the other boundaries that he overcame throughout his life: he was an American in Rome teaching the Orthodox liturgy of Byzantium and the Christian East at a pontifical Catholic institute and praying daily in the Byzantine Russian tradition. It was a life of contrasts that he sought to reconcile through the breadth of his heart in his liturgical and ecumenical scholarship.

Born on January 9, 1932, in Providence, Rhode Island, Robert Francis Taft spent most of his life in the Christian East. He was the second of five children, raised in a pious, upper-middle-class Irish Roman Catholic family, learning how to serve as an altar boy at Mass from his father on the staircase of their Cranston, RI, home. His father was critical of the secular clergy but respected the Jesuits and made it known that he would be proud if one of his sons were to join the Society of Jesus. Taft entered the Jesuit Order immediately after

high school on August 14, 1949, and began his formation in Massachusetts, initially struggling to keep pace with the other novices despite his solid education from the LaSalle Christian Brothers. It was only after a few years in the novitiate that he first heard of Eastern Christianity—a tradition that captivated him and guided him throughout the remainder of his life.²

For the duration of his academic career, no one needed to guess what he thought about a certain issue: he made it known in lectures, interviews, books, and articles. Despite ending the practice of keeping a diary during his Jesuit regency as an English teacher at Baghdad College in 1958, after being forced to burn it in the turmoil of the Iraqi revolution, he wrote extensively about his work and his life, giving glimpses into his thought and insights beyond the world of Byzantine liturgical studies.³

After ordination to the priesthood in the Byzantine Rite at Weston College on June 7, 1963, Taft was sent to Rome for studies, arriving while the Second Vatican Council was in session. He even concelebrated at a Byzantine Rite Divine Liturgy in English in St. Peter's Basilica—the first of its kind—on

1 See *Through Their Own Eyes* (Berkeley, CA, 2006), 26–27; “Good Bye to All That: Swansong of an Old Academician,” *SVThQ* 59 (2015): 129 n. 1.

2 See *New England Jesuit Oral History Program*, vol. 128, *Fr. Robert F. Taft, S.J., F.B.A.*, ed. P. C. Kenney, S.J. (Weston, MA, 2017).

3 For such reflections, see “Response to the Berakah Award,” *Worship* 59 (1985): 304–25; “The Liturgical Enterprise Twenty-Five Years after Alexander Schmemmann,” *SVThQ* 53 (2009): 139–63.

December 6, 1965, shortly before the Council's conclusion. The Council made a significant mark on all aspects of his liturgical scholarship, and Father Taft made Rome his home, teaching at the Pontifical Oriental Institute until 2008 and taking up the duties of editor of *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* and *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* as well as vice rector of the Institute, among others, over the course of his tenure as professor. During these years he maintained close ties with North American academia as visiting professor at the University of Notre Dame and founding member of the North American Academy of Liturgy.

Rather than simply collecting facts, Taft understood that his duty as a liturgical historian was to interpret them: "Knowledge is not the accumulation of data, not even new data, but the perception of relationships in the data, the creation of hypothetical frameworks to explain new data, or to explain in new ways the old."⁴ This is, perhaps, Taft's greatest achievement for the study of liturgy: explaining what it all means. And he did so from both a historical and a theological perspective.

Before diving into liturgical studies, his first publications focused on Eastern Catholicism, to which he would return frequently both in his capacity as a consultant of the Vatican's Congregation for the Oriental Churches from 1983 until 2011 and in his emphasis on the "healing of memories" due to tensions arising from Uniatism and difficult Orthodox-Catholic relations, especially in Eastern Europe.

The publication of his doctoral thesis on the Great Entrance of the Divine Liturgy immediately established him as a formidable liturgist. Although his *Doktorvater*, Juan Mateos, S.J., intended Taft's thesis to cover the whole Liturgy of the Eucharist and complement his own volume on the Liturgy of the Word, Taft understood that after having written over four hundred pages on only the initial rite of the transfer of the Eucharistic bread and wine from the skeuophylakion or pastophorion to the altar before the Anaphora even began, it was time to submit and save the rest for later. He defended his thesis at the Pontifical Oriental Institute on December 21, 1970, and published it in 1975 (with subsequent editions appearing in 1978, 1994, and 2004), after studying oriental languages at the Université catholique de Louvain—already into

his forties by this time. The rest of the Divine Liturgy became his life's work, resulting in the six-volume corpus *A History of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*, of which only volume three remains to be published. Despite considering himself a "late vocation" to the study of liturgy, Taft ventured beyond the Eucharist into all aspects of liturgy, including the Liturgy of the Hours, receiving the accolades and awards of various societies, ranging from laureate of the Catholic Press Association to fellow of the British Academy to archimandrite of the Ukrainian Greco-Catholic Church and stavrophore of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. His *Byzantine Rite: A Short History* elegantly distills over a thousand years of liturgical history in eighty-four pages, offering readers an indispensable periodization of Byzantine worship and pointing out further venues for research, many of which still remain to be explored.⁵ *Beyond East and West*, a collection of articles on method in liturgical studies, is perhaps the book where, as his friend Thomas J. Talley wrote in the foreword, Taft's "style of pedagogy and an asceticism in scholarly method" are best comprehended and readers understand his concern for pastoral practice grounded in history and theology.⁶ The approach throughout was that of "comparative liturgy," of which Taft became one of the greatest proponents. With over eight hundred publications, it was often said of Father Taft that "never was so much written about so little for so few."⁷

Throughout, Taft avoided romanticism and rejected the "myths of Eastern liturgical conservatism." He rejected any "Golden Age" of liturgy—whether early Christian or patristic or Byzantine—that was not the present. And he knew how to explain it all in clear language, every so often using contemporary cultural references or quotations from American politicians or baseball players to drive the point home. He made the study of Byzantine liturgy exciting.

Much of his work was in one way or another connected to Dumbarton Oaks. Taft's first appearance at the estate of the Blisses was as a speaker on May 11,

5 See also "Liturgy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies*, ed. E. Jeffreys et al. (New York, 2008).

6 T. J. Talley, foreword to the 2d rev. and enl. ed. (Rome, 2001), 11.

7 "Ringraziamento," *Studi sull'Oriente Cristiano* 16.1 (2012): 51. The precise attribution of the statement is unknown, although it is believed to have been made by Taft's friend and colleague Thomas J. Talley.

4 "Good Bye to All That," 358.

1979, during the “Byzantine Liturgy” Symposium alongside José Grosdidier de Matons, Cyril Mango, and Alexander Schmemmann, to name a few. There he presented a paper on liturgy in Constantinople at the end of the eighth century that would become foundational for rehabilitating the genre of liturgical mystagogy and showing how it fit into the broader history of the Byzantine Rite.⁸ This symposium inaugurated Taft’s close collaboration with Dumbarton Oaks: he spoke at two other Dumbarton Oaks symposia and one colloquium, was twice a fellow (1984–1985, 1993–1994), once a summer fellow (1988–1989), and was later appointed to the committee of senior fellows, ultimately chairing the body for several years (1996–1998, 1999–2001). Taft’s lectures and papers associated with Dumbarton Oaks reveal the tendency of his research and writing to shift from the methods and approaches of classical *Liturgiewissenschaft* toward the questions of social discourse and history “from the bottom up.”⁹

As a person, Taft had his devotees and admirers, but there were also those who resented his American “cowboy” style or at times colorful language. Nevertheless, even his critics respected his scholarship.¹⁰ Taft’s students were extremely faithful to him—although none was able to match his faithfulness to them. He promoted their work at the beginning of their careers, quoting and praising them in the footnotes of his articles. He brought them along to conferences and shared his knowledge with them well beyond the classroom—a normal thing to do in North America but revolutionary in ecclesiastical Rome. In addition to the two *Festschriften* they published in his honor in 1993 and 2006, his students gathered his memorable aphorisms and dicta, and circulated them among themselves, even repeating them to each other with a mix of wit and reverence, alternating between respectful anecdotes about “Father Taft” and the more familiar “Bob.”¹¹

8 “The Liturgy of the Great Church,” *DOP* 34 (1980–1981): 45–75.

9 *Through Their Own Eyes*, 4–12.

10 Glen Bowersock described him as a remarkable person, “a distinctly immodest man and self-important person, but a very good scholar,” who “contributed quite a lot” as a Senior Fellow of Byzantine Studies at Dumbarton Oaks. See Oral History Interview with Glen Bowersock, July 13, 2009, <http://www.doaks.org/research/library-archives/dumbarton-oaks-archives/historical-records/oral-history-project/glen-bowersock>. Retrieved February 1, 2019.

11 *Collected Sayings of Robert Taft*, ed. International Commission on Extemporaneity in Lectures (South Bend, IN: n.p., 1987);

Robert Taft left Rome in December 2011, just shy of his eightieth birthday, and sent most of his books and writing to the archive of the Katholische Universität Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, whose Collegium Orientale he had been instrumental in establishing, remaining in close contact throughout his life. Those documents, along with the rest of his published works, will be a source for further studies of liturgy and of Taft as a person and a scholar. His publications have become helpful guides for the research of his colleagues and students. Nevertheless, those following in his footsteps will certainly have new theories to posit and correctives to suggest, whether regarding the authorship of the Anaphora of St. John Chrysostom, or the localization and subject of the Mystagogy of Maximus Confessor, or the reading of the Old Testament at the Divine Liturgy in Constantinople, to name just a few of the recent debates.

Leaving Rome, where he had spent most of his life as a Jesuit, Taft returned to Weston, Massachusetts, where his philosophical and theological studies in the Society of Jesus began. Because of the decline in vocations and rise of elderly Jesuits, the same grand building that had served as a college in the 1960s was now a retirement home. Over fifty years later, the same friends and classmates who had gone to the ends of the world to teach and preach were now together again, enjoying each other’s company at table and in the chapel every day. It was a joy to visit Father Taft there and see him in a different light—no longer holding court and pontificating, but leading a slower-paced life and experiencing the grace of God: “His divine finger healing our wounds,” as he put it.¹²

As Robert Taft asserted in 2005, when anticipating his farewell to Byzantium: “To those who believe, there is no end but only what comes next.”¹³ Father Taft has gone to his rest, leaving work for the next generation of liturgists—his students, colleagues, and the members of the Society of Oriental Liturgy, which he founded in 2006. It is perhaps fitting that, as his own mentor left his work on the Divine Liturgy unfinished for his student to complete, so too he departs without seeing his

Apophthegmata Taftorum: The Collected Sayings of Robert Taft, 3rd extremely critical edition (Rome: n.p., 2011).

12 Kenney, *New England Jesuit Oral History Program*, vol. 128, 30–31.

13 *Through Their Own Eyes*, 160.

magnum opus on the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom completed, namely, the yet to be published third volume on the Anaphora—the offering.¹⁴ The book that is to deal with anamnesis, epiclesis, oblation, and sacrifice has nonetheless already been observed in a life of sacrifice and dedication to God and neighbor, following the command of the Lord to do so in his memory.

On November 12, 2018, Robert Taft's brothers in the Society of Jesus, his students in the discipline of

liturgy, and his devoted family and friends gathered for his funeral at Weston, to bid him farewell and to bury him, calling to mind his love and praying to Christ to place his soul among the just.

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14 *A History of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*, vol. 3, *The Anaphora* (Rome, forthcoming). See also S. Parenti, *L'Anafora di Crisostomo: Testo e contesti*, *Jerusalem Theologisches Forum* (Münster, forthcoming).

☛ ROBERT TAFT'S MANY PUBLICATIONS UP TO June 2013 have been compiled in a bibliography online at <https://ecpubs.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/TaftBiblio-text.pdf>. For this reason, many of Taft's pre-2013 publications have not been cited or they are referred to succinctly, including omission of the author's name.